

ST. CROIX, W. I., April, 1886.

Extending my rides and drives in various directions, I behold that wide-spread and mournful decay which has befallen this, in common with nearly all the West India Islands. The cultivation of large districts formerly producing thousands of hogheads of sugar has been abandoned; these are principally rugged mountain-tracts stretching along the north side, where they are exposed to the incessant Trade Winds. As one looks up to the precipitous sides of the towering mountains from the romantic carriage-way that follows the shore of the "sounding sea" at their base, the wonder is that they were ever cultivated. They are now grown over with wild shrubbery and the scanty Guinea-grass, through which large flocks and herds tended by negro-drivers wander for pasturage. Throughout all parts of the island

cane-cultivation has decreased. Unfruitful patches have been permanently "turned out," the labor and manure have been concentrated upon the smaller and naturally richer areas. Here and there an embarrassed estate has gone to waste. Although from what one sees, for the most part, he would not dream that a blight had fallen upon the island, yet many striking facts, such as those noticed already, and "figures which cannot lie," unite to tell the story of its present desolation. At one period as many as 45,000 households of sugar per annum were inspected at the different custom-houses; beside this, large quanti-

The causes of the existing decay are obvious, and these results were inevitable. At the time of the great production above-mentioned, sugar-cane grew almost spontaneously; compared with the present, little labor was requisite, and the lands could dispense with the aid of manure; but the cane, being a rank, succulent plant, makes large demands on the soil, which it could not long supply. To maintain the lands in a productive state,

the natural exhaustion must be repaired, or some artificial means. The merest novice in agriculture ought to know that the soil of a cane-field, better than any other, is liable to rotation in crops, the richest lands will finally fail; but if the old planters possessed this knowledge, they did not profit by it. In fact, in sufficient quantities they could not have ascertained if they had tried; accustomed to getting large crops without it, they did not apply their ingenuities to its accumulation, and they shrank from the additional labor. So they kept planting and cutting over the same extended fields until the plants would not amount to anything, and, step by step, the cane-lands were seriously impaired. One was the only crop, and therefore there was no such thing as *rotation*; and as to *rest*—the living constantly up to, and in many instances be-

This brings to view another great cause of the present decline—namely, the expensive habits of life of the old proprietors, and, consequent thereupon, personal inattention to their estates. Without a rigid and close, calculating economy the largest fortune will presently become embarrassed and at last fail. They expended a great deal imprudently on equipage, on useless servants, on

their private table, and on giving or lending their residence and style to public entertainments. Large and expensive balls were common. Great dinner-parties were of almost daily occurrence. At these the choicest qualities and the rarest varieties of wines flowed like water. To say nothing of other kinds it was no uncommon thing for the planter to have his annual pipe of Madeira. A large bowl of punch was always prepared at noon for casual guests; and, at dinner, when the careless old planters gathered at six o'clock around

the lavish border of a neighboring estate, the quantities of wine said to have been drunk surpasses belief until the sequel is honestly related that the "jolly old souls" sat over their bottles till the short hours of the morning, talking of women and sorrow and the glorious Past, and drinking to the effluence "more rain," by which time most of them were under the table gloriously drunk and a most plausible state to be got home by their faithful slaves.

By the way a good story is told touching the feast "More rain," which, owing to the dependence of the canes on an abundance of rain, was an invariable one in the olden time; not only at dinners, but wherever and whenever there chanced to be any social drinking. "More rain" was the

standing toast. An old St. Croix planter was once entertained at a large party in Amsterdam, just after a succession of heavy rains had broken away the dikes and inundated large portions of the city; his health had been proposed and drunk; and, wishing to do the best possible thing, he responded by the universal toast of his native island, which is said to have produced a marked sensation—the thick-headed old burghers staring at

Such habits, rendering it impossible for the planters to give personal supervision to their affairs, resulted in the expensive and wasteful management of overcrops: to obtain the greatest possible returns with the least possible expenditure and labor became the principle on which the plantations were cultivated; and under this system the lands rapidly decreased in value; the embarrassed owners, instead of having to provide merely for current expenses, were forced to rake and scrape enough to pay their annual interest, and for this purpose to run the estates at a ruinous rate until, when no longer able to maintain the running fire, the attorney stepped in and took possession in the name of the king or some European capitalist. A large number of the estates are the property of the laborer. The Hazy haze

personal property of the king. The West India Company, twenty or six of the best planters of the island is owned by the heirs of Benjamin De Forest of New York. They have, besides, another fine estate. The property in the island is in the possession of the families of the proprietors of fifty years ago. Absenteeism here, as in other West India Islands, does not tend to the improvement of the lands, though its destructive tendency is not so marked as it is elsewhere described to be.

Another cause which we must notice is the insufficiency of labor; for many years there have not been laborers enough to cultivate the entire island. As early as 1803 the Slave-trade here was abolished; since when the increase of the blacks has been quite inadequate to the demands of labor,

particularly considering that as the soil became through use and misuse more ungenerous, more hands were required for the same number of acres. Plantation in 1842 gave a severe shock to the planters—saddling them not only with new and heavy expenses, but reducing the number of laborers and rendering their labor less remunerative. Some of the former laborers have left the estates, and a uniform system of extreme leniency to them has been appointed by the Government—limiting the number of working hours per day, by which the planters lose much of the labor they

Yet, notwithstanding these indications of decay, there are, on the other hand, signs that the depreciation has reached its lowest stage, and that a process of new and more wholesome prosperity has set in. St. Croix seems about to enter upon a new era—to have been passing through a transition state. There is an energy, enterprise and hopefulness in the present proprietors and about their estates, indicating the practice, here and there,

In my next I will endeavor to exhibit the changes from the old regime, and those elements recently introduced in the problem of this island's future which seem likely to make it at no distant day one of the most prosperous and happy of the Caribbean Isles.

B. W.